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Bonhoeffer. First Run/Icarus Films.

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“We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the oppressed, the reviled-in short from the perspective of those who suffer.”^[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these lines in a famous letter from prison, later titled “After Ten Years,” to fellow resisters in December 1942. Driven principally by his spiritual beliefs rather than by a preoccupation with the “good of the fatherland,” Bonhoeffer found it somewhat easier than most of his co-conspirators to join the resistance. He spoke out from the very first days of the Nazi dictatorship, and with Martin Niemoeller and others he organized the Pastors’ Emergency League and then the Confessing Church in 1934 in response to the campaign to coordinate and Nazify all civic institutions, including the Protestant church, known as *Gleichschaltung*. Bonhoeffer had thus already made himself an enemy of the Third Reich when, in 1940, he was conscripted into the counterintelligence department of the Armed Forces—the *Abwehr*—with the help of Colonel Hans Oster and Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, who were at the center of the military-based resistance to Hitler. This position allowed him to travel abroad, and in 1941-42 he traveled three times to Switzerland and also to Sweden and Norway, meeting with resistance and church contacts. Bonhoeffer was arrested in April 1943 following the arrest of one of his co-conspirators. The failed assassination attempt on Hitler of July 20, 1944 “sealed the fate” of Bonhoeffer, as this film tells us: he was transferred to various camps and prisons, including Buchenwald, in early 1945 and executed on April 9, not quite a month before the final defeat of the Hitler regime. Martin Doblmeier’s excellent 2003 documentary presents the drama of Bonhoeffer’s life in a vivid, compelling style through interviews with approximately two dozen people, inter-

persed with archival film footage and excerpts from Bonhoeffer’s writings and letters. Doblmeier had access to several of the most important surviving acquaintances and students of Bonhoeffer, as well as such pre-eminent theologians and historians as Peter Hoffmann and John de Gruchy, the author or editor of several books on Bonhoeffer. The recollections of Bonhoeffer’s close friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, to whom the film is dedicated (he died in 2000), are particularly valuable. Doblmeier emphasizes his former teacher’s lasting and varied influence through interviews with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, present-day leaders of an African-American church in Harlem that Bonhoeffer attended in the early 1930s, and others. Finally, the filmmaker skillfully uses narration and newsreel footage to pinpoint the important turning points in the consolidation of the dictatorship, the extension of repression, and the course of the war. Although the use of an actor to voice statements from the writings of a historical figure can be risky, it can be difficult to avoid in the case of a biographical documentary. *Bonhoeffer* avoids any undue awkwardness through Doblmeier’s use of the great German actor Klaus Maria Brandauer (*Mephisto*, *Colonel Redl*) to recite passages from Bonhoeffer’s writings and letters. Brandauer gives power and feeling to the lines from such courageous statements as the famous “Spoke in the Wheel” lecture of April 1933, in which Bonhoeffer asserted that, when the state tramples upon human rights, the Christian church should not only “aid the victims of state action” or “ban the victims under the wheel, but ... put a spoke in the wheel itself”—a speech that was far too radical for his audience, most of whom left before he was finished. Many viewers will find the section on Bonhoeffer’s experience in Harlem particularly fascinating. The young theologian accepted an appointment to Union Theological Seminary, in New York, where he

studied under the famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and befriended Jean Lasserre, a student with openly pacifist politics. Bonhoeffer began attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where Adam Clayton Powell Sr. presided at the time. Bonhoeffer “witnessed for the first time the political and social engagement” of the Church, and was also moved by the “rapturous passion and vision” exhibited by the congregation. This experience had a profound effect on the young German—who in his early years, as shown in the film, was not a particularly free-spirited or adventurous soul and, indeed, was initially “disturbed by the casual atmosphere” at the Union seminary. In the film, students of Bonhoeffer’s describe how the Abyssinian Baptists influenced not only his theology but his use of African-American spirituals and gospel music in the Finkenwalde seminary that he ran after he returned to Germany. <p> Doblmeier—the president of Journey Films, which produces movies on religious subjects—also explores the theological traditions that shaped Bonhoeffer’s early years and that he would come to rebel against. According to German Lutheranism, Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” for example, set a standard that humans could not reach; the power of this speech lay in its vision of some future or heavenly state of affairs, not in its proscriptions for conduct on this earth. The sermon was supposed to “make us aware of how sinful we are,” as explained in the film by theologian John de Gruchy, while Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, had “quite a fresh thought” that “Jesus actually intended us to live like this.” <p> In an April 1933 essay Bonhoeffer maintained that the German state had a right to address the “Jewish Question” in the manner it saw fit and even included the age-old charge that “the ‘chosen people’ ... nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross.’ Yet within a few years he would bravely condemn not only the anti-Jewish actions of the Nazi regime but also its political and theological rationale, and his unequivocal opposition to anti-Semitism by the early 1940s distinguished him from his fellow resisters in the <cite>Abwehr</cite>.[2] It is not altogether surprising that, in his younger years, Bonhoeffer shared the Christian anti-Semitism that had prevailed in church theology for so many centuries. <cite>Bonhoeffer</cite> could have conveyed more strongly the evolution in its subject’s thinking on the so-called Jewish Question, as this would have reinforced our understanding of Bonhoeffer as a man who rejected dogma and who learned from experience. The documentary points out that the Confessing Church was silent in the wake of <cite>Kristallnacht</cite> in 1938, while quoting some impassioned words from Bonhoeffer (“only he who cries

out for the Jews may sing Gregorian Chants”). Bishop Albrecht Schohner, a former student of Bonhoeffer’s, opines in the film that “war and the injustice toward the Jews drove him to the resistance,” and a former student adds that his sympathy for the cause of African-Americans helped him understand the condition of German Jews. <p> <cite>Bonhoeffer</cite> portrays a man who often defied expectations and rarely followed the accepted or easy route: from his decision to join the ministry, which was explicitly at odds with his parents’ expectations, to his path-breaking theological contributions and his embrace of anti-Nazi resistance. While the Sermon on the Mount formed a cornerstone of his belief system, he was sufficiently “of this world” to reject at least one or two of the Sermon’s proscriptions, as demonstrated by the fact that he joined a conspiracy to assassinate the dictator. (“But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also,” Matthew 5:39.) <p> The documentary succeeds in tracking Bonhoeffer’s gradual and uneven progression toward the conclusions of the last period of his life, and Doblmeier reveals his subject’s personality in its complexity; his students of the early 1930s felt he was “close and remote at the same time, superior and distanced yet open and ready.”[3] While some specialists may be frustrated by the necessary condensation of Bonhoeffer’s life and ideas as well as the occasional lack of precision, Doblmeier has produced a memorable account that provides an excellent introduction to the general viewer and that is also very useful for teachers not only of Nazi-era history but also of broader questions of faith and personal practice. Doblmeier succeeds in showing the influence of Bonhoeffer’s philosophy and actions at key moments of the Nazi period and the development of the resistance inside the <cite>Abwehr</cite>, while correctly emphasizing the spiritual and ethical dimension that ultimately shaped everything in Bonhoeffer’s adult life. At a time when a better known religious-themed movie has managed to “assault rather than uplift the spirit”—to paraphrase the <cite>New York Times</cite> review of <cite>The Passion of the Christ</cite>—Doblmeier’s documentary is welcome for its insight into the spiritual and political life of this martyr of the Third Reich.[4] <p> Notes <p> [1]. Quoted in Ruth Zerner, “Church, State and the ‘Jewish Question,’” in John W. de Gruchy, ed., <cite>The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer</cite> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 191. <p> [2]. See Theodore Hamerow, <cite>On the Road to the Wolf’s Liar: German Resistance to Hitler</cite> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 66-79.

[3]. Renate Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 61. [4] A.O. Scott, "Film Review: Good and Evil Locked in Violent Showdown," *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2004. Section E, page 1.

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